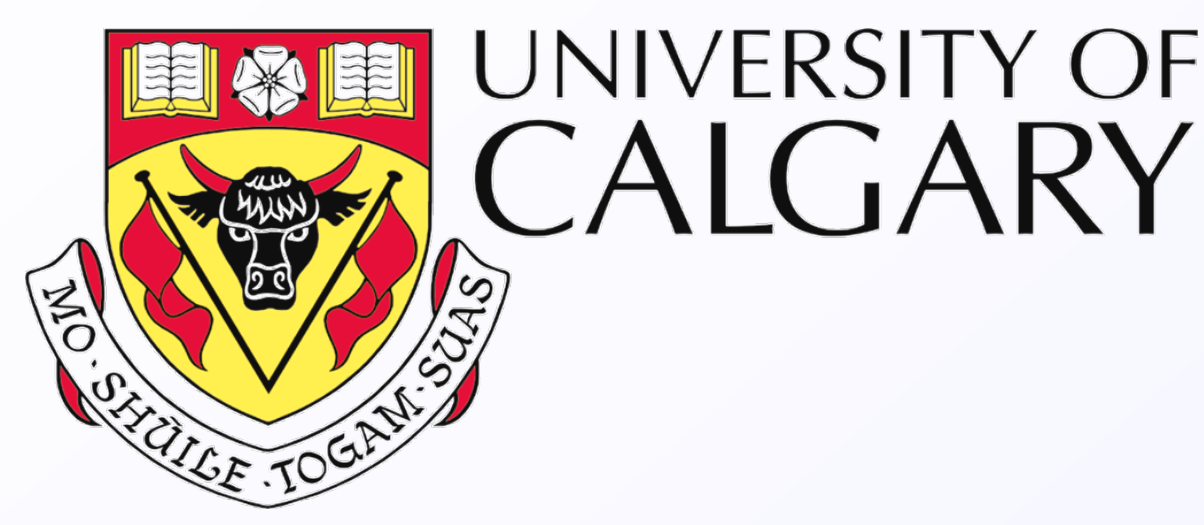


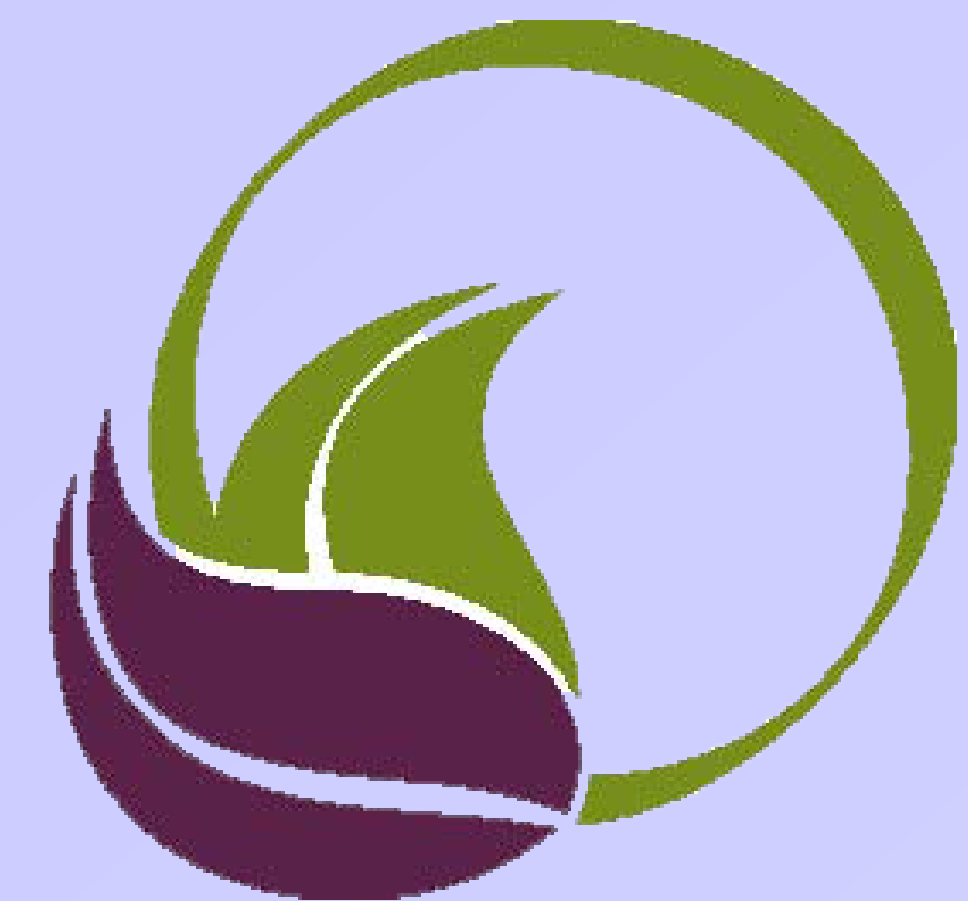
# MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR SUPPORT WORKERS ASSISTING OLDER ADULTS LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY



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## BACKGROUND:

➤ Alberta's Continuing Care Strategy is committed to helping older adults remain in their homes.



Alberta's "Continuing Care Strategy: Aging in the Right Place" recognizes that seniors want to remain in their own homes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there are multiple factors that may compromise an older adult's ability to live independently, including physical frailty and the inability to do instrumental tasks of daily living (e.g., shopping, cleaning, etc.). Physical frailty is often accompanied by mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

➤ It is estimated that, among older adults that receive supportive services in the community, 40.5% have a recognizable mental health problem.<sup>2</sup>

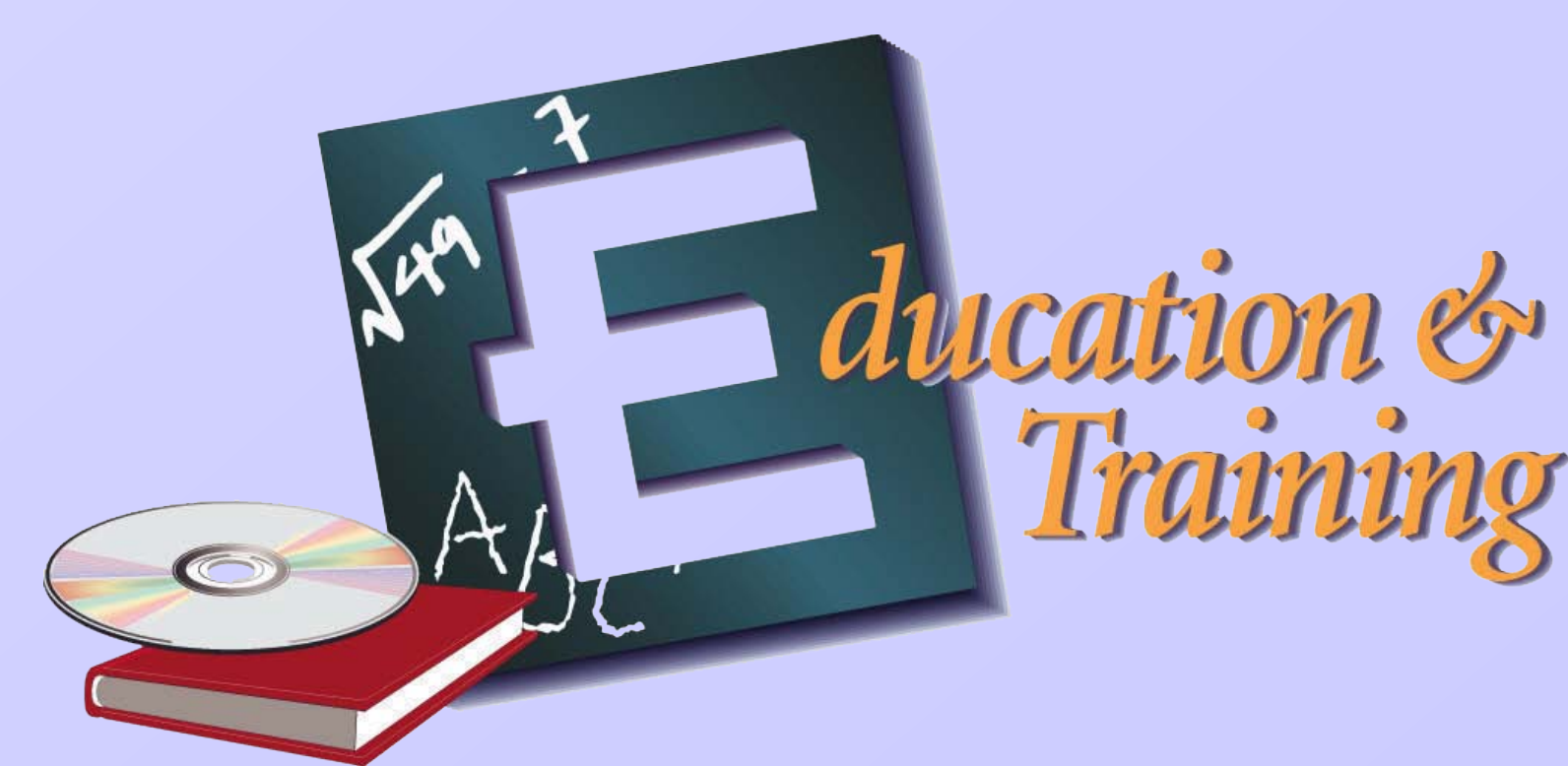
Many more older adults have subsyndromal conditions that may not meet the full criteria for a mental health problem but nevertheless have serious consequences. For example, subsyndromal depression is a risk factor for major depression and suicide.<sup>3,4</sup> Often these symptoms go undetected and untreated. Isolated seniors may cope by self-medicating with alcohol or other substances, leading to further disability.<sup>5</sup> Early detection has the potential to reverse this trajectory of decline.

Unfortunately, supportive services tend to focus on activities of daily living or instrumental needs, while mental health needs are neglected or misunderstood. The consequences of not detecting and responding to mental health problems are serious, and include poorer health status, pain, and decreased functional and cognitive abilities. This, in turn, increases the risk of admission to long-term care and leads to significant suffering for affected older adults and their family members.<sup>3, 6, 7</sup>

➤ Support workers in the community are in a pivotal position to detect and respond to mental health problems among clients and their family caregivers who may themselves be frail and isolated. However, most support workers do not receive adequate training in this area.

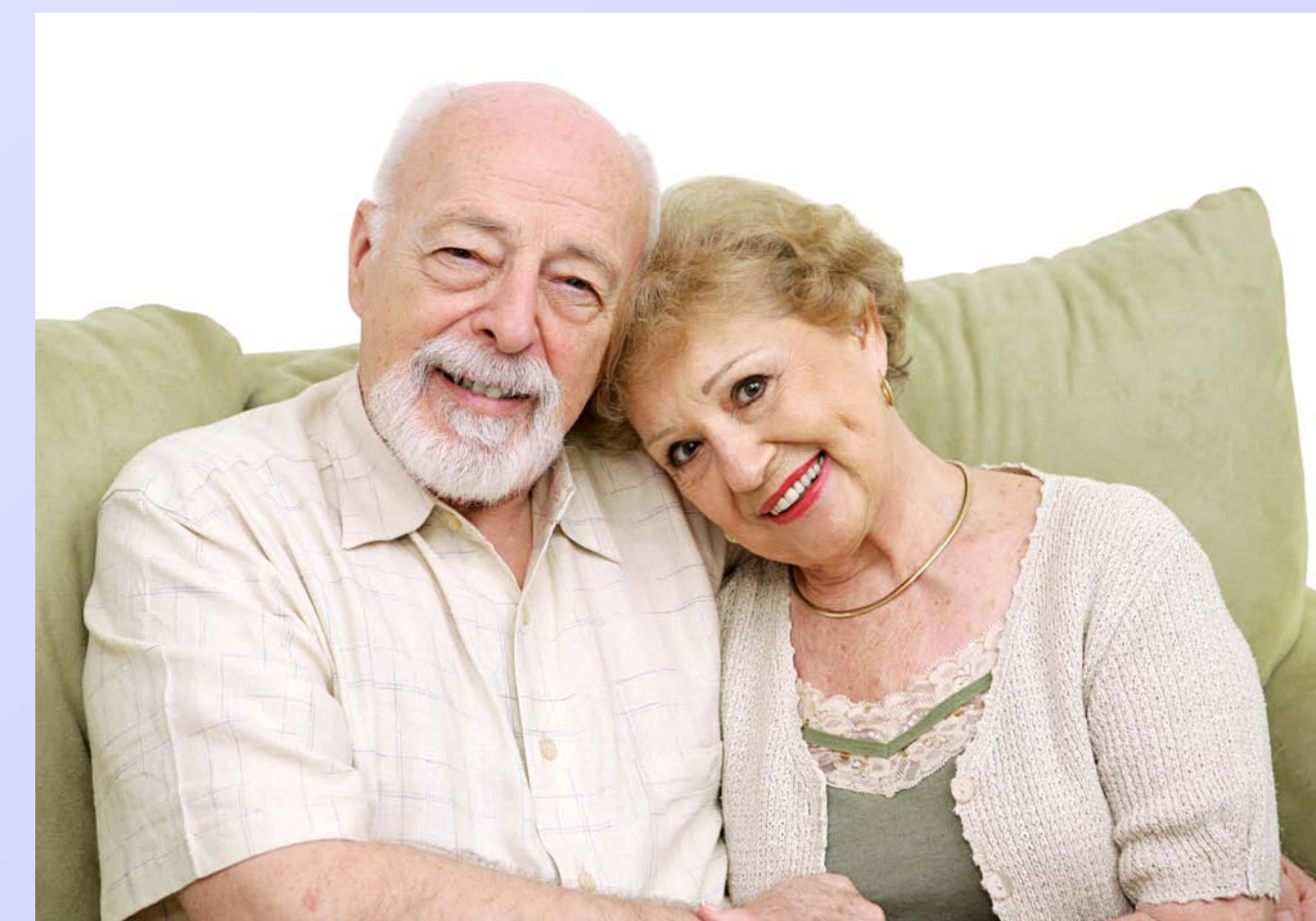
The training they do receive is often focused on providing instrumental care, without attention to the emotional and mental health needs of clients. Moreover, these support workers are not exempt from the stigmatizing attitudes and prejudices towards mental health problems that are prevalent in society at large.

➤ Calgary Family Services has identified, as their top educational priority, further training for support workers in working with clients who have mental health problems.



## GOALS OF THE RESEARCH:

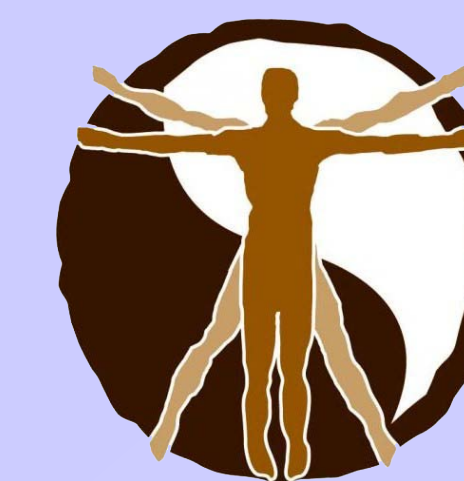
- 1) To conduct a systematic literature review of the types of education and training programs that are available for support workers who are providing assistance to seniors in their homes.
- 2) To conduct semi-structured interviews with key administrators, support workers, and older adults receiving support in their homes to obtain their views regarding the types of training that is most needed.
- 3) To lay the groundwork for a future funding application (e.g., refining the specific research questions, choosing outcome measures that will be sensitive to changes in both support workers and the older clients they serve, conducting pilot research).



## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT: Why is this research important?

➤ Aging in place is an important contributor to the well-being of seniors.

➤ Mental health education and training will help staff support clients in a more holistic manner, attending to both the physical and emotional needs of seniors.



➤ It will improve communication between support workers and their clients, and will increase empathy and compassion for those seniors with mental health problems.



➤ Lack of adequate staff training decreases overall job satisfaction leading to high rates of absenteeism, staff turnover, and disruptions to continuity of care. Thus, the provision of mental health training benefits seniors and the staff who care for them

## APPROACH:

### Goal 1: Literature review

The purpose of the literature review is to survey the knowledge base and best practices in this area (including identifying gaps in the literature), to inform the content of the structured interviews (goal 2), and to provide a literature base for future research applications. The review will be conducted using electronic databases (e.g., PsycInfo, Ageline, Medline) with a keyword tracking procedure. Literature to be reviewed will have been published over the past 15 years and available in English.

Representative questions include:

➤ What are the best practices for training support workers, many of whom have limited educational backgrounds (e.g., methods, duration and format, enabling and reinforcing strategies, peer mentoring and coaching, sustainability)?

➤ What content should be delivered (e.g., mental health content, behavioural strategies, communication skills, stigma reduction)?

➤ How should the content be adapted to reflect the diversity of support workers and the older clients they serve (e.g., culture, income, education)?

### Goal 2: Semi-structured interviews to assess training needs

**Target Population.** The target populations for this research are key administrators, support workers, and older adult clients (65+) affiliated with the Senior Support Program (SSP), Calgary Family Services. The SSP provides assistance to approximately 650 older Calgarians, helping them to "age in place." Services include companion and respite care, grocery shopping, meal preparation, light housekeeping, and laundry.

A semi-structured interview guide will be developed based on the findings from the literature review, and in consultation with administrators, support staff, and older adult clients from SSP. The goal of the guide will be to solicit feedback from administrators, support workers, and their clients, addressing basic questions such as:

➤ What do support workers need to know to identify and refer older clients with mental health problems?

➤ How can support workers assist clients with comorbid physical and mental health problems so that they can continue to live independently in the community?

➤ What stigma reduction strategies can be used to foster understanding, empathy, and compassion for older adults with mental health problems?

### Goal 3: Development of a funding proposal

The results of the literature review and the semi-structured interview will be used to obtain additional funding for the development and evaluation of a mental health training program for support workers.

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